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CANADA AND THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION

The International Labor Organization is one of 13 Specialized Agencies linked with the United Nations through agreements arranged by the Economic and Social Council and approved by the General Assembly and by the organization concerned. The Specialized Agencies of the United Nations are expert in their respective fields: labor, health, education, food and agriculture, finance and banking, civil aviation, postal matters, atomic energy, telecommunications, meteorology, international development and maritime matters.

History

By 1815, the Industrial Revolution and 25 years of war had produced many problems in such fields as control of child labor, industrial health and safety, working conditions in mines and factories, and limitation of hours of work. A number of European countries, including Britain, began slowly to reform some of the worst abuses in factories and mines; but the belief spread that international action was needed since the problems were the same in all industrialized countries. Robert Owen, British cotton manufacturer and social reformer, urged the Aix-la-Chapelle Conference in 1818 to draw up international standards for conditions of work in all their countries, and, in the next 80 years, various workers' international congresses passed resolutions demanding action. Several European industrial conferences were held between 1890 and 1913, to discuss international labor conventions designed to prevent night work and to establish a maximum ten-hour workday for women and young people, and brought some improvement in national conditions.

The war of 1914-1918 required all-out production, and the working people loyally helped to achieve victory for the allied countries. By 1919, inflation, unemployment and starvation had made the life of the workers miserable in the war-ravaged countries of Europe. Faced with this situation, the allied governments realized the need for a labor charter in the Peace Treaty of Versailles, not only to help in improving living and working conditions but also to help in maintaining peace and prosperity throughout the world.

Canadian government and labor leaders, asserting their national status as a separate Canadian delegation at the Peace Conference, took the initiative along with other British delegates and with the United States delegates in drawing up the constitution of the International Labor Organization. The ILO was planned in association with the League of Nations, but as an autonomous tripartite agency where governments, employers and workers from member countries could discuss their urgent problems freely and independently.

In 1940, the ILO accepted an invitation from the Canadian Government to move to Montreal, where, throughout the war, it continued its worldwide work on a limited scale from the McGill University campus. The ILO returned to Geneva in 1948. One main task was to reassess and reorganize the objectives and programs of the Organization in order to meet the most critical problems of the postwar world. In 1946, the ILO became one of the Specialized Agencies of the United Nations.

Objectives

The ILO's aim, as reflected in the preamble to its constitution, was to contribute to universal and lasting peace through the promotion of social justice. The Declaration of Philadelphia, 1944, re-emphasized this and asserted that "poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere", stressing urgent need to aid the war-torn and underdeveloped parts of the world. In order to achieve these objectives, the ILO is "tripartite" in character, bringing together representatives of government, labor and management from the member nations, a feature unique among the UN Specialized Agencies. It has gradually built up an International Labor Code dealing with such matters as employment and unemployment, conditions and employment, industrial relations and labor inspection, freedom of association, employment of children and young persons, industrial safety and health, maternity protection and employment of women, human rights (including freedom from discrimination), social insurance and security, and special problems of various industries and occupations.

The Labor Code, now constantly being revised and strengthened, consists of (a) 128 conventions, the ratification of any of which by a member government obliges that country to maintain its legislation in the particular field at the convention standards and to report every two years to the ILO on its implementation, and (b) 132 recommendations that set forth general principles and detailed procedures, to guide governments and organizations in drafting legislation or administrative regulations if they so desire.

The ILO has also studied problems of special importance referred to it by the United Nations, such as forced labor and freedom of association. The most significant extension of ILO activities since 1950, however, has been its operational program designed to increase regional productivity and to raise economic levels in the less-developed member countries. The ILO spends money allocated for this work from various United Nations funds, and has also financed additional manpower-training projects from its own budget. There has been close co-operation with the other Specialized Agencies in all aspects of the ILO operational program, including co-ordinated joint projects in various areas.

Structure and Activities

The ILO has three main organs:

(1) The Governing Body consists of 48 members (24 government, 12 employer and 12 worker members). The ten nations of chief industrial importance (including Canada) have permanent government members, while the other 14 government members, the 12 worker members and the 12 employer members are elected every three years. There are also deputy and substitute members for each of the three groups. This executive council meets three or four times a year to formulate policies and programs, to supervise the activities of the various conferences and committees, and to review the work of the International Labor Office.

(2) The International Labor Conference is now a world assembly of about 1,500 delegates, advisers and observers, meeting each year to discuss urgent world labor problems, to survey the general activities of the Organization, and to approve the annual budget. Each member nation may send four delegates (two government, one worker and one employer), as well as technical advisers. The Conference draws up and adopts international labor conventions and recommendations for the voluntary guidance of legislatures and employers' and workers' organizations. It also debates and adopts resolutions on labor and social matters of current world importance.

(3) The International Labor Office at Geneva, acts under the Director-General as the permanent secretariat, the research and information center, and the publishing-house for the Organization. Branch offices represent the ILO in various parts of the world (the Canadian branch is located at 178 Queen Street, Ottawa), and field offices have been set up in certain underdeveloped areas to carry out the technical assistance program.

In addition to the three principal organs, there are numerous conferences, commissions and committees to meet specific needs. Regional conferences of American, European, Asian, African and Near Eastern countries are held every few years. Ten tripartite industrial committees, established in 1945, meet every few years to discuss special problems affecting particular industries; there are also technical meetings on numerous other industries and occupations. There are advisory committees and panels of consultants on many topics, such as forced labor, freedom of association, migration, social security, women's work, juvenile employment, occupational safety and health, labor statistics, co-operation, etc.; every year groups of experts meet to study urgent problems in some of these areas. The most important conclusions of these bodies are eventually referred to the annual Conference for more thorough discussion, with a view to the adoption of conventions and recommendations.

Canadian Participation

Canada's participation in international labor affairs dates from 1910, when Mr. Mackenzie King attended a labor conference at Lugano, Switzerland. The next year, as Minister of Labor, Mr. King acted on one of the conference recommendations by introducing a bill in the House of Commons to prohibit the use of white phosphorous in making matches. As already mentioned, Canada took an active part in the establishment of the International Labor Organization in 1919, and has supported it fully ever since. Canada has been represented by government, employer and worker delegates at each session of the International Labor Conference and has participated in many other ILO activities.

As early as 1926, Canada ratified four ILO maritime conventions and, by 1968, has ratified a total of 24 conventions dealing with conditions of employment of seafarers and dockers, hours of work and weekly rest in industry, minimum wage-fixing machinery, employment service organization, discrimination, employment policy, and so forth. Canada reports regularly to the ILO on the measures that have been taken to implement these and other conventions. One obstacle that has discouraged Canadian ratification is that the large majority of ILO conventions are in areas that are, in Canada, mainly within provincial legislative jurisdiction. Since 1960, however, there has been increasing co-operation with the provinces on all ILO matters, and procedures are being developed for co-ordinated implementation and ratification of the most important ILO conventions.

In the past, Canada obtained helpful advice from the International Labor Office when such matters as conciliation in labor disputes, unemployment insurance, and establishment of employment services were being considered. More recently, Canada has been able to repay this assistance by contributing to the development of the less-industrialized nations. The ILO has used Canadian experts in its technical-assistance program in underdeveloped countries, and has sent trainees from such countries to Canada for study and on-the-job training.

While the Department of External Affairs has the general responsibility for handling Canada's international relations, including its United Nations commitments, the Department of Labor is the official liaison agency between the Canadian Government and the ILO. With the expansion in ILO activities after the Second World War, a special branch of the Department of Labor was established to work in close co-operation with the Department of External Affairs, with other federal departments, with the provincial departments of labor and with employers' and workers' organizations, all of which have an interest in the ILO. In this way, the ILO is kept informed on the progress of industrial and economic conditions in Canada, and the Canadian governments and organizations concerned are kept in touch with developments in the international field. Each year some progress is made toward uniform and higher labor standards in Canada, in line with the International Labor Code, and Canada thus plays its part in furthering the purposes of the ILO.

ILO Fiftieth Anniversary

The year 1969 is the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the ILO. Canada, like all other members, is arranging celebrations with the twofold purpose of making the ILO better known throughout Canada and improving Canada's participation in ILO programs for the future.

In addition to informative exhibits and a commemorative stamp, a wide range of articles is being prepared for publication, along with special radio and television programs and discussion guides for schools. A tripartite federal-provincial conference is planned in the autumn to review the important ILO conventions and the improvement of procedures for implementation, and academic seminars and studies will probe certain aspects in depth.

Congratulatory statements are planned in the federal and provincial legislative bodies and at various management and labor conferences, and speeches will be given across Canada by noted figures from the international labor field. Other organizations interested in international affairs are also planning special programs to celebrate the ILO's fiftieth anniversary. Canada will be contributing to the ILO's World Employment Program, and particularly to the multi-functional Caribbean Regional Training Center.

This double-fronted campaign, to increase labor-management and federal-provincial co-operation within Canada and to improve Canada's contribution in the international labor field, balances the other side of the Canadian anniversary theme - to celebrate the 50 years of world achievement by the International Labor Organization, while planning to make the next 50 years even more successful in raising the working and living standards not only of Canadians but of all the peoples of the world.



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